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ABSTRACT

A sample of 564 inquiries made to the National Children's Bureau (NCB) question and answer service during 1970-72 was analyzed. Three-quarters of all inquiries came by letter, and nearly all the remainder by telephone. Apart from inquiries concerning the NCB itself, inquiries were mostly for information on a variety of topics concerned with children. Most inquiries were for "any information" on a topic, though requests for references, statistics and addresses were also common. Students formed by far the largest body of inquirers, followed by various professional bodies, other groups and local authorities. Half the replies given consisted solely of references; addresses accounted for over a quarter of all replies. In 12 percent of the cases, no direct help could be given. Replies were nearly always given in a personal letter. In 1972 the average delay in replying was 7 days. Suggestions were made for rationalization of the service, by greater formalization of replies, increased use of handouts, pre-packaging of information where appropriate. Any such rationalization should be accompanied by an assessment of its effects, particularly the effects of reducing the personal elements of the reply. (Author)

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Design of Information Systems in the Social Sciences

Research Reports
Series B no.2

Analysis of requests made to the National Children's Bureau question and answer service

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Analysis of requests made to the National Children's Bureau question and answer service

Bath University

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Note on the publication of DISISS Research Reports

The research project Design of Information Systems in the Social Sciences (DISISS) was carried out with the support of a grant from the Office for Scientific and Technical Information between 1971 and 1974. The central team was based at the University of Bath, and assisted by members of the School of Librarianship at the Polytechnic of North London, and researchers at the Open University.

During the project a series of Working Papers was produced reporting progress and preliminary findings. These Working Papers are still available, some in hard copy and some in microfiche, from the Library, Bath University, Claverton Down, Bath BA2 7AY.

The results of the research are reported in two series of papers. Series A consists of reports of research and issues central to the project. Series B consists of papers of special aspects of research and of subsidiary studies that can be reported independently.

FOREWORD

The information service of the National Children's Bureau has developed rapidly since its inception early in 1970. This naturally presents a problem for analysis - the difficulty of making a long-exposure single shot of a rapidly moving organism. In order to provide a background to this report a brief summary of the stages of development of the information service is given below.

1. Preliminary feasibility study, 1969. Over 100 professional people concerned with children, from medicine, education, and social work, were visited and asked if they felt the need for an information service, what sort of information they might require, and in what ways they would like to receive it. They agreed such a service would be valuable and would meet a real need, and listed about 150 subjects of interest. They made, however, two stipulations: no questionnaires for the purpose of collecting information, and no newsletters or regular distribution of printed matter.

2. Collection of information, early 1970 onwards. A keyword index of some 200 terms was devised for filing and retrieving information. Where possible each item is backed by print, but many of the facts recorded are about activities not yet published.

3. Immediate information for enquirers, early 1970 onwards. This consists of the question and answer service described in the report. We have tried to obtain feedback on the usefulness of this part of the information service. In 1972 we sent a very brief questionnaire to 100 recipients of our fullest replies: only 20 were returned. All but two of the respondents were completely satisfied, but such data is not very informative. In the first six months of 1973 we posted 221 replies: only 18 were acknowledged. It is possible that an adequate feedback from users at this level is not possible in practice.

4. Reduction of personal letters by the use of printed lists. The librarian began, in mid-1970, to prepare basic reading lists; there are now (September, 1973) seventy of these. In the main they are used for vaguely defined enquiries (usually from students) for information on a particular subject. In 1971 we produced a classified film index of some 400 documentary

films about children; a revised edition of 500 films has just been produced (September, 1973).

5. Collections of more concentrated specialised information, 1971-72. The Spotlight series of information hand books provides information on a particular service either by direct reports or from abstracts of articles; on average about 70 items are referred to in each report. The first three in this series are:

Spotlight 1 on physical and mental assessment (1971)
Spotlight 2 on group work with parents in special circumstances (1972)
Spotlight 3 on services for the young handicapped child (1972).

6. Information about sources. A number of questions are concerned with the location of sources of information. We have therefore recently produced a small reference book, Spotlight 4 on sources of information about children (published winter 1973-74). This lists, under the different headings, the sources, both statistical and general, of the most useful facts.

7. Widespread dissemination of information. The Highlight series, which has been run experimentally during 1973, is an effort to reach field-workers who neither write in for information nor read informative books. They are single sheets, printed on both sides, each one in a different colour, either summarising an important report of one profession for readers in another, or abstracting research findings on relatively small but important topics of general interest. These are distributed by a very large mailing list; extra copies are available on request. The following eight titles have already been produced:

1. The Halsey report and the pre-school child
2. Children of working mothers
3. Problems of children of West Indian immigrants
4. Children in flats
5. Vernon report on the education of the visually handicapped
6. Success and failure in fostering.
7. Non-accidental injuries in children
8. Children in one-parent families

By these means we have tried gradually to extend the range of our service and develop activities to reach an increasingly larger number of people. We are faced with two dilemmas common to many information services:

the need to use printed material as against the reluctance of people to receive it and the need for increased efficiency and rationalisation as against the qualities of a personal service. Our continuing effort is to try and find the balance between these two pairs of extremes.

Jessie Parfit, M.D.
Information Officer
National Children's Bureau

September, 1973

PREFACE

This report describes the results of work carried out as part of the DISISS (Design of Information Systems in the Social Sciences) research project, at the University of Bath. The objective of the project is to carry out research necessary for the effective design of information systems in the social sciences, whether by the creation of new systems or the modification of existing ones. The project, which is funded by OSTI, commenced in 1971 and will continue until the end of 1974.

This report is concerned with the evaluation of an existing information service for practitioners - the question and answer service of the National Children's Bureau.

Barbara Skelton conducted most of the work and was responsible for producing the first draft of the report. Michael Brittain, Maurice Line, and Jessie Parfit read the draft, suggested alterations and additions, and made contributions. Stephen Roberts and Peter Burridge also gave assistance in the preparation of the report.

ABSTRACT

A sample of 564 enquiries made to the National Children's Bureau (NCB) question and answer service in 1970, 1971 and 1972 was analysed. The total number of enquirers increased greatly over the three years, and enquiries were more frequent in some months than others. Three-quarters of all enquiries came by letter, and nearly all the remainder by telephone.

Apart from enquiries concerning the NCB itself, enquiries were mostly for information on a great variety of topics concerned with children. Most enquiries were for 'any information' on a topic, though requests for references, statistics and addresses were also common. Students formed by far the largest body of enquirers, followed by various professional bodies and other bodies and local authorities.

Half the replies given consisted solely of references; addresses accounted for over a quarter of all replies. In 12 per cent of cases, no help could be given directly. Replies were nearly always given in a personal letter. The average delay in replying was 7 days in 1972.

Suggestions are made for rationalisation of the service, by greater formalisation of replies, increased use of handouts, pre-packaging of information where possible, and referrals to other libraries and bodies where appropriate. Any rationalisation on these lines should be accompanied by an assessment of its effects, particularly the effects of reducing the personal elements of the reply.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Preliminary

The evaluation of information systems and services is an integral part of the research programme of the Design of Information Systems in the Social Sciences (DISISS). The results of INFROSS* indicated an a priori case for certain types of information service; the INFROSS Reports argued that the case should be put to the test, by evaluation of existing services and also the setting up of experimental services. This report is concerned with the examination and a partial evaluation of an existing information service of a semi-formal nature.

During the latter half of 1972, discussions took place with the National Children's Bureau with a view to investigating the question and answer service of its information service. It was agreed that analysis of the requests received by the Bureau - their origin, content and mode of satisfaction - should be carried out; this would provide information of interest to the Bureau and also be of value to DISISS.

1.2 The evaluation of information services and information systems design

Information systems design must take into account user behaviour, presentation of information and costs. A considerable part of the DISISS project is concerned with the analysis and interpretation of data relating to these three factors. These studies will be used in the construction of a model of a secondary information service in the social sciences, the ultimate objective being to optimize the service, operating with given resources and in a known environment. An Experimental Information Service for Planners has been set up using material from Geo Abstracts in order to test the following parameters of a secondary service, individually and in relation to one another: coverage; frequency of issue; type and fullness of entry; and index. Even though an information system may be designed from the beginning using optimization techniques, on-going evaluation of the system is necessary as needs, costs, techniques and other factors change; user behaviour in particular may be liable to change, perhaps in response to an improved system. It is appropriate for DISISS to investigate information system design not only in experimental situations but also by evaluating existing services, since this helps to identify needs and uses, as well

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* INFROSS (Investigation into Information Requirements of the Social Sciences) was carried out at the University of Bath between 1968 and 1970, supported by an OSTI grant.

as adequacy of services, in given areas at given points in time.

Although most information studies have concentrated on the researcher and his needs, services to practitioners are also important and in need of improvement. Accordingly, an opportunity to study an existing service to practitioners was sought; so far as was known, no service of this type had been investigated before. An excellent opportunity was provided by the National Children's Bureau, which had a well developed on-going information service of a highly flexible kind aimed at serving people in all professions concerned with children, notably medicine, education and social work.

The investigation that was carried out on the enquiries made to the question and answer service was little more than an analysis; certainly it cannot be called an evaluation, though it is possible to draw some valid conclusions from it. For a true evaluation, the reasons for enquiries would have to be ascertained, and the extent to which replies had met the needs would have to be estimated; moreover, the service would have to be measured against not merely actual enquiries but potential enquiries. However, the analysis presented here offers a basis for further investigation if required.

1.3 National Children's Bureau information service

The National Children's Bureau, formerly the National Bureau for Co-operation in Child Care, was founded in 1963 with five main objectives:

(i) Making readily available existing knowledge in children's developments and needs

(ii) Improving communication and co-operation between education, medicine and social work, and between voluntary and statutory bodies

(iii) Evaluating existing services and encouraging new developments

(iv) Contributing to new knowledge and assisting others wishing to do so

(v) In general, promoting the all-round development of children, whether they are normal or handicapped, whether they live with their own families or are cared for elsewhere.

Within the context of these five main objectives, the Bureau set up an information service in 1969. This is staffed by one full and one part time professional staff member and a full-time secretary, and has available to it the service of the Bureau's librarian. Some of its principal aims are:

(a) to provide a service for professional enquirers

(b) to give information about new developments, on-going research, current concerns or discussions under way

(c) to spread knowledge about the activities and literature of one profession for those in another

(d) to provide reading lists, bibliographical references, information about documentary films

(e) to direct enquirers to sources of information which will include books, places, and people

(f) to direct enquirers to other information services where relevant, and to complement, not duplicate, such sources.

One of the ways in which the Bureau tries to fulfil these aims is by the operation of a question and answer service which is the focus of the present study. Enquiries are received by letter, telephone or personal visits, and it has been the policy of the service that most enquiries receive a personal reply.

Requests for information are welcomed from non-members of the Bureau as well as members. Membership of the Bureau includes education, health and social service authorities in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland; professional associations; national voluntary organisations; university departments and colleges of education; hospital authorities; consultative members, including all central government departments concerned with the interests of children; private individual members, and many overseas members.

1.4 Sampling and analyses

The Bureau began recording enquiries from April 1970 onwards. In all, 294 requests were received in 1970, 431 in 1971, and 731 in 1972. For the purposes of the analysis reported here, 188 requests were sampled from each year, giving a total sample size of 564, about two-fifths of all requests (see Table 1). The sample from each year was

requests in the year: this meant that the sampling fraction was different for each year.

The analyses required were:

(i) origin of request

(ii) form in which request was made

(iii) nature and subject of information, as requested and as supplied.

To establish whether requests could in fact be analysed meaningfully in this way, and to help identify sub-categories within each analysis, a pilot study was first carried out on 100 requests. Details of the categories as determined in the light of the pilot study are given in Section 2.0

In the Tables, the figures under each year are based on the sample. When a figure which related to all three years was required, this had to be calculated on the basis of the total number of requests in each category per year, because the sampling fraction differed for each year. The total number of requests in each year was obtained by multiplying the number in the sample by the sampling fraction for that year. In addition, the total number of 1970 requests was weighted (by a factor of 4/3) to take account of the fact that data was available for nine months only.

2.0 RESULTS

2.1 Number and form of enquiries

Table 1

Number of enquiries received

MONTH	1970	1971	1972
January		33	46
February		29*	69
March		61	71
April	15	39	44
May	28	31	37
June	18	43	59
July	27	24	64
August	26	22	51
September	38	21	80
October	67	46	81
November	36	46	83
December	39	36	46
TOTAL	294	431	731

* 1971 Postal strike in U.K.

Total for 3 years : 1,456

Weighted total for 1970 : 392

Weighted total for 3 years : 1,554

A count was made of the total number of enquiries received by the Bureau per month each year. The results are given in Table 1. Figures are available only from April 1970. The most striking feature is the great increase in the number of requests: 9 per cent more requests were received in 1971 than in 1970 (using the weighted total) and 41 per cent more requests in 1972 than 1971. Demand appears to reach a peak in the September - November period; there is a lesser peak in February and March. However, data for a longer period would be necessary to confirm such a trend, which would not be

A breakdown of requests by form of request is given in Table 2. As will be seen, the pattern for all three years is extremely similar, with letters accounting for around three-quarters of all requests, and personal visits for a tiny proportion.

Table 2

Form of enquiries

FORM OF ENQUIRIES	1970	1971	1972	All 3 years (weighted)
(Population)	(294)	(431)	(731)	(1554)
Letters	73.7	77.5	74.4	75.1
Telephone	25.5	21.3	23.4	23.4
Personal [1]	0.8	1.2	2.2	1.5
TOTAL	100	100	100	100

2.2 Nature and subject of request

Requests are divided by subject, plus four other categories related to the content of the request; these four categories were identified during the pilot analysis. They were: activities and membership of the Bureau, training facilities for social work, help with employment, and requests relating to specific publications by the Bureau. When the main analysis was conducted, more small categories were identified, and these were grouped together in a miscellaneous category. The main results are shown in Table 3; the enquiries are more fully specified in Tables 4 and 5.

1 Personal visits include only those persons who called at the Bureau as they were passing by. A large number of visitors were received at the Bureau from this country and from abroad who were seeking specific and general information. These visits, which were always by appointment, have not been included in the analysis.

Table 3

Nature of enquiries

NATURE OF ENQUIRIES	percentages 1970	1971	1972	All 3 years (weighted)
(Population)	(294)	(382)	(701)	(1,377)
Subject (see Table 4)	61.2	68.8	66.0	65.4
Activities and membership of NCB[1]	6.4	12.6	12.7	11.0
Training facilities	2.7	4.7	2.3	3.1
Help with employment	1.6	4.2	5.0	3.9
NCB publications	11.2	1.8	2.3	4.5
Miscellaneous (see Table 5)	17.2	7.9	11.7	12.1
TOTAL	100	100	100	100

In interpreting these Tables, it must be borne in mind that they give only percentages, not absolute figures. What appears to be a relative decline over the three years could be an absolute increase for any given category. As mentioned earlier, the total number of requests received by the Bureau increased substantially over the period. Not all the requests in the sample could be analysed by nature or subject; some telephone requests were not recorded in detail, and therefore the exact nature of the request could not be determined.

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1 These figures do not represent the total number of enquiries about membership of the NCB. Enquiries of this nature are dealt with by the information service only when they are part of another enquiry or when they are from particular people (e.g. doctors) for whom it is thought a personal reply is more fitting. Otherwise all routine enquiries about the NCB and membership are dealt with by the administrative section of the Bureau.

Table 4

Subjects occurring 3 times or more in each year

(Percentages of total number of enquiries for information on subjects per year)

SUBJECT	1970	1971	1972
Adoption	-	3.5	3.9
Child care/welfare	20	6.1	8.4
Child development	7.8	3.5	2.6
Children in care	7.0	4.3	5.0
Children's homes	-	-	3.4
Deprived children	2.6	-	-
Dyslexia	-	-	3.4
Fostering	5.3	4.3	-
Gifted children	-	-	3.4
Handicapped (general)	7.8	7.8	6.7
Handicapped school leavers	-	-	2.6
Mentally handicapped	-	-	3.4
Physically handicapped	-	-	2.6
Holiday homes	3.0	3.5	-
One parent families	2.6	-	-
Play groups	3.5	-	2.6
Pre-school children	-	2.6	-
Sub-normal children	-	7.0	-
Under-privileged children	2.6	-	-

The majority of enquiries (65 per cent) were for information on particular subjects. A list of the subjects is given in Appendix A. The range of subjects on which information was wanted was fairly wide, but only nineteen occurred three times or more in the sample over the whole three year period. Table 4 lists these subjects, showing the proportion of requests for each subject in each year. This Table must be read with a number of reservations, as a general indication only. Categorization by subject is always a rather arbitrary, uncertain

procedure, as, apart from borderline problems, any subject identified may be broad or narrow, and may accordingly account for a large or small number of items. For example, child care and welfare appears from Table 4 to be the most frequently requested subject, but this is a general category which may conceal a large number of sub-categories. If all the 'handicapped' requests had been combined, they would have accounted for by far the highest proportion of requests in 1972. Moreover, the slight shifts that appear from year to year may be due to the sampling, or to a variety of causes other than an actual change in interests of potential enquirers. However, Table 4 does show the general pattern.

Eleven per cent of all enquiries were for information on the activities and membership of the Bureau; the proportion of these requests increased over the three years, to an extent that is unlikely to be due to sampling or other errors.

Three per cent of all enquiries were concerned with training facilities for social work, and although the percentage of requests increased in 1971, it declined in 1972. Four per cent of all requests were for help with employment, and requests of this type did increase over the three years. Five per cent of all requests were concerned with publications by the Bureau. In 1970 the percentage of requests in this category was fairly high (11 per cent) but decreased markedly in 1971 and 1972. Telephone requests concerned with publications were not usually filed and recorded. There are two main reasons for the decline in the number of requests about NCB publications. First, the last six publications have been published by the NFER,[1] and enquiries tend to go to NFER's press officer. Secondly, for the last six months of 1972 the Bureau had its own press officer and enquiries were dealt with directly by her.

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1. NFER : National Foundation for Educational Research.

Table 5.

Miscellaneous enquiries

(percentages of all enquiries per year)

SUBJECT	1970	1971	1972	All 3 years (weighted)
List of voluntary societies	1.6	-	2.7	1.6
List of children's homes	0.5	1.4	1.7	1.3
Teaching materials	1.6	1.4	0.6	1.1
Borrowing facilities of the NCB	3.2	1.4	-	1.0
List of playgroups	1.1	-	1.1	0.8
Help with study tour of U.S.A.	0.5	1.4	0.6	0.8
Speakers for a conference	-	1.4	0.6	0.7
List of schools for the handicapped	2.2	-	-	0.6
Information about a conference	0.5	-	0.6	0.4
Help in planning a teaching course	-	1.4	-	0.4
Help in setting up a library	-	1.4	-	0.4
Help with setting up a nursery unit	-	-	0.6	0.3
Help with publication of a book	-	-	0.6	0.3
Exchange visits abroad for handicapped	-	-	0.6	0.3
List of grant-giving bodies	0.5	-	-	0.1
List of schools to visit	0.5	-	-	0.1
Miscellaneous personal requests for advice	4.7	2.8	1.1	2.1

Note: The inadequacies of this, or any other detailed subject breakdown of queries are recognised; in particular, there is no clear division between some of the categories.

'Miscellaneous' enquiries are listed in Table 5. Two per cent were from persons seeking advice on their own personal problems. The percentage of requests of this type declined in 1971 and 1972. A small percentage of requests asked specifically for lists of children's homes and lists of homes for the physically and mentally handicapped. Other requests were for the recommendation of speakers for conferences, and some asked for help and advice on the setting up of teaching courses, nursery units for the handicapped, and setting up a library. A further number of requests asked for help in planning programmes for visits, either abroad or in U.K. Finally some requests in 1970 and 1972 were to enquire about facilities for borrowing books and articles from the Bureau.

2.3 Type/form of information requested

Six main categories of type/form of information were identified. Some enquiries included two or more types/forms. Table 6 indicates that 55 per cent of all requests did not specify details of particular types of information needed, but asked for 'any information'. Over the three years the sample analysis showed a decrease in the proportion of requests of this type; this suggests that enquiries grew more specific, perhaps from experience.

When the type/form of information needed was specified, it was most likely to be for bibliographical references, and these accounted for an increasing proportion of requests over the three years. The next most common enquiries were for research findings which could, of course, be in the form of references, and for addresses and names. These enquiries came not only from persons requiring addresses of named organizations, but also from persons wanting to be put in contact with others who had a similar interest, or from whom they could obtain advice. For example, several requests were from researchers who wanted to know if anyone else was working in the same field as themselves. Statistics and films each accounted for a small proportion of requests. The drop in the number of requests about films is mainly due to the fact that with the publication of the film index at the end of 1971, the availability of films has become more widely known, and fewer people write in for information about them. Also, the requests that are still received are not recorded in the main file of requests and are not therefore included in the analysis.

Table 6

Type/form of information requested

TYPE/FORM OF INFORMATION	(Percentages) 1970	1971	1972	All 3 years (weighted)
(Population)	(200)	(304)	(591)	(1162)
"Any Information"	61.6	54.3	51.9	54.8
References	14.1	15.7	23.0	19.1
Research findings	8.6	9.9	10.5	9.9
Addresses and names	9.4	8.9	8.0	8.6
Statistics	2.4	5.3	4.6	4.3
Films	3.9	5.9	2.0	3.5
TOTAL	100	100	100	100

2.4 Origin of enquiries

Enquiries were classified according to the type of employment of the person making the enquiry. The results are given in Table 7. The majority of requests (41 per cent) were from students; this proportion was fairly constant over the three years. The next largest category of users was persons working in professional, commercial, and voluntary organizations, who accounted for 12 per cent of all requests over the three years. Professional bodies included institutions, such as the National Institute for Social Work Training, National Foundation for Educational Research, and the Council on Training of Health Visitors. Commercial bodies included the press and television, as well as commercial firms. Voluntary bodies included Voluntary Service Overseas, Task Force, Dr. Barnardo's and the National Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Children. The third largest users of the Bureau were local authorities and these accounted for 10 per cent of all enquiries over the three years. The proportion of requests from local authorities increased markedly over the three years; in 1972 the proportion of requests was double that in 1970. Teachers were coded as a separate category from local authority employees because the information requirements of teachers are likely to be quite different from other local government employees. Also, the information requirements of different types of teachers in higher education and in schools may differ and separate categories have therefore been made for these. Teachers in higher education and schoolteachers tended to use the Bureau to almost the same extent. No data was available on the origin of 22 per cent of enquiries; these included telephone calls where the place of employment of the user was not always recorded, and also letters from persons who gave no indication of their employment or if they were employed at all.

Table 7

Origin of enquiries

ORIGIN OF ENQUIRIES	1970	1971	1972	All 3 years (weighted)
(Population)	(294)	(431)	(731)	(1554)
Students	42.9	38.8	40.4	40.6
Professional, commercial and voluntary bodies	15.3	11.7	10.1	11.9
Local authorities	6.5	9.0	12.8	10.2
Higher education teachers	5.1	6.9	4.8	5.5
Hospitals	2.1	6.4	5.8	5.0
School teachers	6.8	4.2	3.2	4.4
Central government	1.1	0.5	-	0.4
No data available	20.4	22.7	22.8	22.2
TOTAL	100	100	100	100

2.5 Routeing of enquiries

Two per cent of all enquiries were from abroad; they increased proportionately over the three years. Requests were received from the U.S.A. (much the largest number of foreign requests), from five European countries, from three African countries, and from Australia.

A small proportion (1 per cent) of requests were passed on to the Bureau from other organizations, because it was felt that the Bureau could answer the request more adequately than the original organization to whom it was sent. For similar reasons the Bureau passed on a very small proportion (less than 1 per cent) of requests that it received to other organizations. The main reason for this low figure is that when the Bureau does receive requests that are not relevant, the Bureau tends to reply by giving the name and address of an organization which may be able to help the enquirer. These replies are included in the category 'indirect help' in section 2.6. When enquiries are directly re-routed to another organization, the NCB's information service always telephones the organization concerned to make sure that it can and will deal with the enquiry.

Table 8

Routeing of enquiries

(Percentages of all enquiries per year)

ROUTEING	1970	1971	1972	All 3 years (weighted)
From abroad	3.2	5.3	4.3	1.8
Passed on to NCB	1.6	2.1	2.7	0.9
Passed on from NCB	-	0.5	0.5	0.1

2.6 Type of information given in reply

Four of the categories that were used to analyse the type/form of information requested were also used to analyse the type of information given in reply. In addition, two extra categories were used; these were replies that contained a synthesis of information (see below), and replies that did not give direct answers. Most replies included in the analysis were by letter, but sometimes where a telephone reply was recorded this also was used in the analysis. Also included were letters sent in reply to telephone queries. Sometimes the reply contained more than one type/form of information. The results are shown in Table 9.

Fifty per cent of replies consisted of bibliographical references only, the proportion of replies containing references appeared to decrease over the three years. However, if the figures for research findings are added to those for references, since they also contained references, the proportions are similar for all three years. A reply was defined as containing research findings when a particular study was named and th esults briefly given; only four per cent of replies contained research findings, and these tended to increase proportionally over the three years. Four per cent of all replies contained statistics; this type of reply again tended to increase proportionately over the three years. Twenty eight per cent of replies contained addresses; in 1970 and 1971 the proportion of these replies remained constant, but declined in 1972. An additional category used in the analysis was syntheses of information. In this type of reply, references, research findings, statistics or addresses were not given by themselves; instead, current information was given on a particular subject. For example it might take the form of an assess-

ment of existing facilities in one field, or alternatively, a summary of current ideas and developments was given in addition to supplying names and addresses.

Finally, 12 per cent of requests could not be satisfactorily answered directly. These requests were for advice on personal problems, help with employment, the placement of individual children in homes, hospitals or schools, and various other subjects. Even though no direct answer could be given to these requests, the replies usually contained an address of another organization which might be able to help.

Table 9

Type/form of information given in reply

TYPE OF INFORMATION	(Percentages) 1970	1971	1972	All 3 years (weighted)
(Population)	(217)	(381)	(601)	(1275)
References	58.3	54.6	50.6	50.4
Addresses	30.9	30.6	24.3	28.1
Research findings	1.4	4.4	5.8	4.0
Statistics	0.1	3.2	5.1	3.6
Synthesis	2.1	3.1	0.6	2.4
Indirect help given	6.4	13.1	13.4	11.6
TOTAL	100	100	100	100

2.7 Speed of reply

A count was made of the number of days it took the Bureau to answer the requests. This was done by noting the day the request was sent and the day on which the reply was made. It was impossible to count using the day on which requests were received at the Bureau because this was not usually recorded. The speed of reply, therefore, includes the days when the enquirer's letter was in the post. Requests from abroad and requests that had been passed on from other organizations were not included in this analysis.

In 1970 the average number of days between the sending of a request and reply was 6.7. In 1971 this rose to 6.8 days and in 1972 to 7.4 days. The increase in the average number of days for a reply to be sent may be largely a result of an increase in the number of requests received by the Bureau. Other factors could also contribute to the

delay; for example the increased use of second class mail by the enquirers, and the fact that not all enquiries are sent direct to the information service and some may be delayed in the administration departments of the Bureau. The number of persons working in the service has varied over the three years; for the first part of 1970, only one professional member of the staff worked part time in the information service. Since October 1970, one person has worked full time, but has been engaged in many activities that are not directly related to the answering of requests. In October 1971, another person joined the information service on a part-time basis, and has answered requests as well as having many other responsibilities. In December 1972, due to a resignation, the staff was reduced to one full-time person.[1]

Enquiries are dealt with in the order in which they are received in the post; requests needing research tend to take longer to answer. Enquirers do not usually state any time by which they require the information; the analysis did not include a count of the number of enquiries which were marked 'urgent'. In general, urgent enquiries tend to come by the telephone, and where possible the reply is given immediately, or is posted the same day.

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1. In September 1973 an assistant information officer was added to the staff.

3.0 CONCLUSIONS

The first and most obvious conclusion to be drawn from this analysis is that the information service has attracted a sizable and increasing number of enquiries, of great variety. This indicates that the service is successful. In the following discussion, no criticism of the service is intended; rather, an attempt is made to draw lessons from the analysis which may be of general interest in the context of information services in social welfare. As will be noted, the NCB itself has already moved some way in the directions suggested quite independently.

The policy of the NCB has been to reply to all enquirers personally. This is not only time-consuming; since many replies are essentially the same, or very similar, it may also be wasteful. Beyond a certain point, the effort to serve each enquirer personally could be counter-productive, since increased delays would lead eventually to a decrease in use, or at least to a levelling off.

Moreover, some enquirers may actually be inhibited from asking for help because they realise that a good deal of time and effort is going into the reply. Against this, it can be argued that the personal nature of the service is one of its main attractions, particularly since many of the enquiries must come from persons for whom personal service is an essential element in everyday life, e.g. doctors, social workers and teachers; and although enquiries may be as effectively answered in less personal ways, they may not appear to be if they have not so obviously received personal attention.

However, this issue can be resolved only in practice, and it is useful to consider how such a service as the NCB's could be rationalized. If such a service is to keep up with increasing demands, some rationalisation is the only alternative to an increase in staff, perhaps to an unacceptable level. Rationalization could take two forms: the standardization of procedures and forms for reply, and the production of standard 'packages' for reply. Both of these would save time, the latter much more than the former, particularly as it would make possible a greater use of clerical as opposed to professional labour.

A rationalization would be based on three principles:

(1) information should not be provided that an enquirer can easily obtain by his

(2) information should not be provided that is more readily available from another source

(3) personal replies should be confined to a minimum.

These principles are of course general ones, and could not always be followed to the letter. For example, an enquiry service would not refuse to answer an urgent query it was capable of dealing with on the grounds that some other body was specifically concerned with the subject. And, to emphasize a point made more than once, the question how essential the personal element is to the very nature of the service is a key one which requires special study.

The analysis reported here shows that about two thirds of enquiries were for information on specific subjects. Although the service is concerned with both normal and handicapped children, most requests are for information on handicapped children. This suggests that information about this group is generally less available or that it is more in demand than information on normal children. Requests are received on a very wide range of subjects. Comparatively few subjects are requested frequently. The NCB has in fact recently begun to produce a series of information sheets on specific subjects, known as The Highlight series. The aims are twofold: to abstract the publications and reports of one profession for readers in another, and to summarise research findings on a wide range of small but important topics of general interest. The packaging of information in this manner should avoid writing repetitive replies to persons requiring information on the same subjects.

A fairly large proportion of enquiries were classified as 'miscellaneous'; included in these were enquiries concerning schools for the handicapped, children's homes, play-groups, grant-giving bodies and voluntary societies. Although lists of some of these are available in published form, e.g. grant-giving bodies and voluntary societies, people do not seem to know where to obtain them. In the case of schools and children's homes, it appears, perhaps surprisingly, that often people working in local authorities cannot obtain information on the availability of suitable schools and homes even in their own authority. The information service could produce standardized handouts on some highly specific subjects, listing the most important published directories and other reference material available from any public library.

Another miscellaneous type of request concerned facilities for borrowing journals and books from the Bureau, although the NCB's handout on the information service does give details of the availability of the library services. A wider distribution of details of the library service might help to reduce this type of request, but the problem is a common one: however much printed matter is produced, and however well it is circulated, there will always be some whom it has not reached or who have seen and forgotten it.

The largest category of enquiries was for information concerning the activities and membership of the Bureau. These requests were usually answered by sending relevant reports and literature on the Bureau, but they were always accompanied by a personal letter. Again, the letter could perhaps be replaced by a standardized handout.

In general, the Bureau could offer little help with requests for training facilities and employment in social work. A standardized reply form could be used, with appropriate spaces left for typing in sources of information and addresses of organizations from which relevant information may be obtained, but in view of the small number of enquiries in this category this might not be justified.

Most requests were for 'any information' on a particular subject. These requests tended to be answered by sending references. The Bureau does produce about fifty reading lists which are constantly revised and are sent out mainly to college or school students, but again a personal reply usually accompanies the lists. It would seem that in most cases this is superfluous unless it suggests, as it does sometimes, that the person should approach either his public or college library for information - and even this suggestion could be made in a standardized form.

The majority of requests are from students, many of whom could be sent standardized handouts. Research students having special requests do of course usually need personal replies. However, these replies are often of a fairly straightforward nature, containing research findings, statistics or addresses: only a very small proportion of replies need to be discursive. Frequently, information requested by students could be obtained from their own college library or public library. To guide enquirers to local libraries would not only relieve unnecessary strain on the NCB; local libraries are usually well able to give help, and a development in their services in social welfare

where necessary, is probably overdue.

An obvious suggestion is that a short handbook should be produced, listing sources of such information as addresses, statistics, and so on, and also listing other bodies able to give help on various topics related to children. The Bureau is in fact currently producing just such a handbook, which will be produced as Spotlight no. 4.

These suggestions for rationalization of the information service are in the direction of more formalization. If any of them are put into practice, a survey should ideally be carried out to gauge their effect on the users. It may be that enquirers could find answers to their queries by using the existing formal systems, but it is not certain that they would in fact use them in preference to the informal and personal service of the Bureau. A follow-up enquiry could yield useful information on the desirable balance between formal and informal systems. Such an enquiry might be a difficult and time consuming exercise, but it could be carried out on a sample basis, perhaps with the aid of a small research grant.

If enquirers are encouraged to state a time limit, requests could be sorted on this basis, and efforts made to ensure that each request is replied to by the stated time. This would ensure that replies to persons requiring information by a particular time are not held up by replies with no time limit. When a user is confident that he will receive information by the date required, he is likely to be encouraged to use the Service more.

A further way in which the Service could be rationalized is in the form in which enquiries are submitted. A standardized form could be devised which could be sent in appropriate numbers to all members of the Bureau and to others who make fairly frequent enquiries; this would ensure that the enquiry was put in a consistent form, that no essential parts of it were omitted, that where previous searches had been carried out this was indicated, and that the time limits for receiving information were stated where relevant. It could include space for the reply, so that no information was unnecessarily repeated. One problem would be the fact that enquiries come from a wide range of persons, and it would be difficult to ensure that all potential users of the information service had available the standard forms on which to make their enquiry, but heavy users of the Service, who account for most of the total use could be supplied in advance with forms.

Where enquiries are passed on to another body, care has to be taken to ensure that the body in question is geared to answering the enquiry. Not all institutions by any means, however expert they may be, aim to give an information service; and there may be gaps in social welfare information services that need to be plugged. The NCB information service could perhaps serve, if not as a model, as a guide to parallel institutions; an ultimate aim might be the creation of a network of information services. This would require the development of services by other bodies, and some overall planning to ensure that the whole system gave adequate coverage without unnecessary duplication, and that the various elements were connected by appropriate links.

For the immediate future, if rationalization on the lines suggested is undertaken, its effect in reducing effort, time and therefore cost will be a gradual one. There will be limits beyond which rationalization cannot go without reducing the service offered; and, if the personal element proves to be very important to enquirers, it may be that the limits of rationalization are soon reached. However, these are, as already stated, questions that can be answered only in practice.

APPENDIX*

List of subjects on which information was requested at least once per year (based on the sample)

	1970	1971	1972
Abandoned children			x
Abortion		x	
Adolescence	x	x	x
Adoption			x
Adventure playgrounds		x	x
Age of schoolchildren		x	
Assessment clinics	x		
Asthma			x
Autistic children	x		
Battered children		x	
Bi-lingual children			x
Blind children		x	
Child care/welfare	x	x	x
Child development	x	x	x
Child-minding	x	x	x
Child-parent relationships	x		x
Child psychiatry			x
Children in care			x
Children in need	x	x	
Child violence	x		
Children's homes	x	x	x
Children of mixed marriages			x
Counseling			x
Consensus groups	x		
Cot deaths			x
Cruelty to children	x		
Day care centres	x	x	
Day hospitals	x		
Dangers in the home environment	x		

	1970	1971	1972
Dawn's syndrome			x
Delinquent children	x		
Deprived children	x	x	x
Maternal deprivation	x	x	
Paternal deprivation	x	x	x
Design of centres for handicapped	x	x	x
Design of play space			x
Disadvantaged children		x	x
Disturbed children	x	x	
Drugs		x	
Dwarfism	x		
Dyslexia			x
E.S.N.	x		
Education of children in hospital	x		
Environment and children	x		
Epileptic children			x
Family therapy			x
Fostering	x	x	x
Gifted children			x
Handicapped	x	x	x
Mentally handicapped		x	x
Physically handicapped		x	x
Handicrafts for handicapped			x
Health of schoolchildren	x		
Holiday homes	x	x	x
Holidays for the handicapped			x
Hypothermia			x
Illegitimacy			x
Intelligence rates			x
Intermediate treatment		x	x
Kinesthetic sensitivity		x	
Left-handedness	x		
Leisure facilities	x	x	
Long-stay patients in hospital	x		
Maladjusted children	x	x	
Motherhood		x	

REFERENCES

BATH UNIVERSITY. Investigation into information requirements of the social sciences. Research Reports 1-5. Bath, University Library, May 1971.